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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the North Dakota Teacher Center network, designed to meet the needs of teachers in rural schools. Each of ten locally governed teacher centers houses a library of teaching materials in a school or college setting. Each center coordinates credit and non-credit workshops, classes, and seminars of interest to area educators. Each publishes a newsletter announcing available programs. This document describes development of the teacher centers and includes testimony from three teachers who describe how they used the support network. (TES)

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Centers for Rural Teachers

Based on a presentation to the National Rural Education Association
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Centers for Rural Teachers

Mary M. Harris and Richard G. Landry

Among the most rural of states, North Dakota permeates the isolation of rural teachers with a network of ten teacher centers. The North Dakota Teacher Center Network is now in its twelfth year and serves each of the 279 operating districts in the state, a majority of which enroll fewer than 200 students.

The North Dakota Teacher Centers are located in ten of the larger communities distributed across the state: Fargo, Wahpeton, Valley City, Bismarck/Mandan, Dickinson, Williston, Minot, Devils Lake, Mayville, and Grand Forks. Each Center houses a lending library of teaching materials in a school or college setting. Each coordinates credit and non-credit workshops, classes, and seminars of interest to area educators. Each publishes a newsletter announcing its own programs and others available in the vicinity. Each is staffed by a parttime coordinator with clerical assistance, and each is governed by a local board with coordination through a Network Policy Board. Beyond this, each center is different, reflecting the needs of the teachers who use it.

An evaluation recently conducted by the Network Board included portraits of teacher center users (Landry, 1986). The paragraphs that follow introduce three rural teachers as they use a teacher center in the Network and go on to describe the development of the Network.

Beth

Beth teaches grades one through eight in a one-room rural school. She has twelve students. This year is her second in this county district school, half an hour from her home. Beth uses the Teacher Center in the community in which she lives because she feels a strong need to communicate

with other educators.

"Because I'm by myself," says Beth, "I can't get the backing of other teachers. I can't go to the lounge and exchange frustrations. I don't get the scuttle-butt that other teachers get. I can't just bounce things off other people." Beth receives the Teacher Center newsletter, and she depends on the Center for collegial relationships and information. She feels keenly the coordinator's support
for teachers. "He's the real backbone at the Center. The whole staff is cheerful and helpful, but the coordinator is so excited and so put together and organized."

Beth learns what's going on at the Center often by dropping in and chatting with the staff. "The coordinator has gotten me involved just when I go in to use a ditto machine. He's tell me about the Young Authors Conference or about a workshop coming up." Flyers about upcoming events and activities are mailed to Beth's school, and the Center staff calls her with details.

Beth feels no district pressure to attend Teacher Center workshops or activities. She does feel that the Center provides a valuable service. She explains, "The Teacher Center is like a library. You can go there and browse at your own pace. That's something I like about it--and there's something new all the time." Beth uses the Center to get equipment fixed, to borrow supplementary materials, to get ideas for art projects, and to provide enrichment for her students. The Teacher Center is Beth's key source of staff development, a forum for developing collegial relationships.

Teresa

Teresa teaches third grade in a K-8 rural school. There are seventeen students in her class this year, a typical enrollment. This is Teresa's

fourteenth year of teaching, and she has used the Teacher Centers since their beginning.

"I'm a scrounge," Teresa admits. "I'm always looking for ideas on how to teach and what to teach." Teresa cites many and varied examples of her use of the Teacher Center through the years. She found National Geographic filmstrips and kits to supplement lessons in science and social studies. She shared published short stories, poems, and anecdotes written by her students in How to Dodge a Fisherman's Hook and Other Useful Information by Young Authors of North Dakota, a project coordinated by the Teacher Center Network. She learned from workshop-demonstrations in art, a subject she felt unprepared to teach in spite of its importance to children's creative development. She described a teacher exchange that enabled her and others from her school to visit a Teacher Center for a day. "It was such a lift. They hired a substitute to teach each of our classes for the day. We could ask questions, preview things, and run off stuff while we were there."

Because of her location, Teresa usually communicates with the Teacher Center by mail. "We are dependent on their promptness," she says. "They do answer right away! And nothing I've ever needed has been unavailable." Teresa sees its up-to-dateness as a strength of the Teacher Center collection. There are times in teaching when currency is essential, and Teresa has benefitted from the Center's ability to help her with the space shuttle accident, Halley's Comet, and special occasions such as Hands Across the Border. "If I don't have what I need," concludes Teresa, "I just ask the Teacher Center directors. They have been teachers. They know what will work."

Daniel

Fourth-grade teacher Daniel is two years out of college and turns to the

local Teacher Center as a source of ideas, procedures, and materials to enhance the curriculum for his seventeen students. To learn about Center activities, Daniel drops in, visits with staff, and browses through materials and displays. He typically gets ideas from the professional journals and reads Instructor, Teacher and Learning at the Center. Daniel's nearest Center is conveniently located in the high school building of his district. He uses the services of a second center in the summer, when he attends the university in another community.

Daniel views the science teaching aids as a particular strength of his local Center--filmstrips, booklets, transparencies, charts, scale models, posters. "A guy would have to be a millionaire to have all this stuff himself," Daniel concludes. Daniel has recently reviewed the computer software of the Center for use next year and describes two programs that seem to him especially promising.

Reflecting on the professional development opportunities provided by the Centers, Daniel compares them to those sponsored by school districts or institutions of higher education in which he has participated. Teacher Center activities "are much more comfortable and professional. There is a difference in the atmosphere." Comparing a formal class "to a group of teachers meeting at the Center to make materials for their classrooms or brainstorming ideas for challenging gifted students, you just know that the teachers are going to be more comfortable, and that they will feel they have something to take away that they can use."

North Dakota Teacher Center Network

The Teacher Centers in North Dakota were organized in 1976 by a large number of teachers and administrators, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, the North Dakota Education Association, Council for School

Administrators, School Boards Association, and the State's colleges and universities. Nine Centers were developed initially, one a mail-order operation to serve scattered rural districts. The necessity for this Center has been reduced by the opening of two others and the designation of a service area for each Center.

Initially funded by the Bush Foundation of St. Paul, Minnesota, the Centers first received state funds in 1985 through a legislative appropriation. In 1987, the Teacher Centers were included in the Department of Public Instruction budget. Approximately 36 per cent of the budget for the Centers comes from the State, which is the sole source of income for the two newest Centers. Membership fees paid by user districts, grants, contracts, sales of products, and donations provide additional income for older Centers. The average annual Center budget is currently $24,500. All receive space, telephone lines, and services from host schools and colleges, as well.

Teacher Centers do a lot with a little to serve teachers in outlying schools. Some Centers schedule evening and Saturday hours. Others designate school representatives who live in town; the coordinator makes weekly stops at their homes to deliver materials for whole schools. Other coordinators make periodic circuits to drop-off schools. Last year the ten Centers checked out 25,097 teaching materials, responded to 12,904 telephone or mail inquiries, and were visited 18,900 times by persons who came to look at materials! In a state with approximately 7,000 educators, these figures represent a number of return visits.

The Centers work closely with other agencies in the state. Last year, their newsletters publicized events of groups as diverse as the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, the American Lung Association of North Dakota, the

Prairie Winds Orff Chapter, and the North Dakota Reading Association. The Centers also publicize initiatives of the Department of Public Instruction, serving as clearinghouses for National Diffusion Network and Title II initiatives.

Programming in response to local needs leads to variety among Centers. Last year, for example, one Center reported its MECC membership as a highlight of the year, while another reported its workshop for substitute teachers. One of the new Centers organized grade level talk shops, which led one group to establish a grade level newsletter. When a participating teacher was asked to move to another grade, her first thought was, "Can I still get the "Second Grade Newsletter"?" Newsletters, talk shops, teacher exchanges, make and take workshops, idea exchanges, and materials fairs are means by which the Teacher Centers create a supportive community for rural teachers in North Dakota.

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Biographical Statement

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